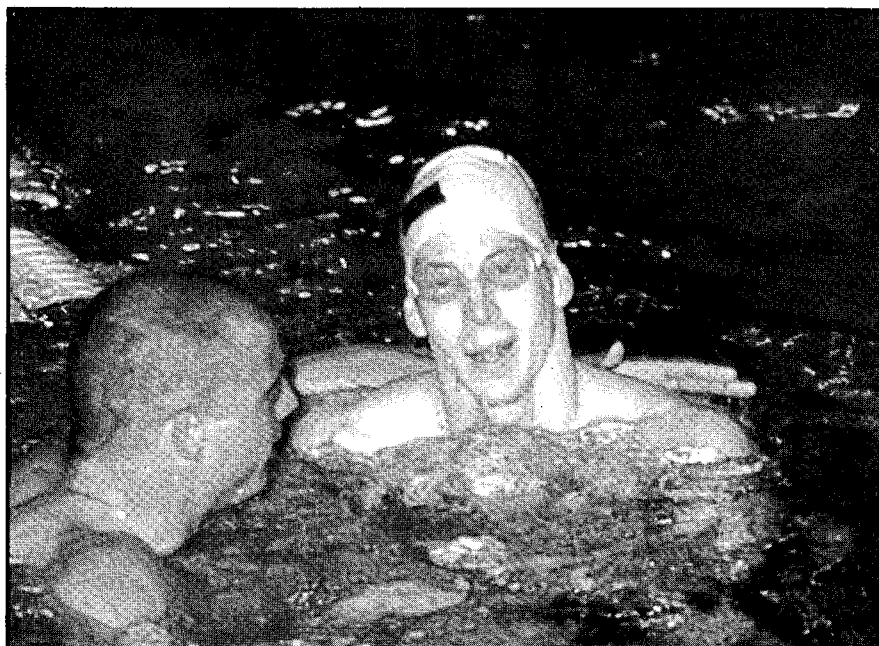


The Grand Ole Fifty

A large noisy crowd, a new fast pool and a longtime heated rivalry lifted Tom Jager to a record 50 free at the short course nationals.

by Russ Ewald



(Photo by Mike Gosman)

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Late on the final night of the Phillips 66/U.S. Swimming Short Course Championships March 19-23, the 2,100 spectators jamming the new Tracy Caulkins Competition Pool started clapping fast and loud in unison. Like a rock music crowd waiting for the main act, they were getting impatient. The attraction was another duel between Olympic champion Matt Biondi and Tom Jager, the silver medalist and world record holder at 50 meters. By remaining in the sport after the Seoul Games, these two have dramatically increased interest in swimming as a spectator sport with their rivalry.

A record time seemed probable. Already, the field was the fastest ever with all eight under 20 seconds in the heats. The top three qualifiers beat the winning time of the NCAA final the night before.

Finally, the finalists arrived from

the ready room. Their appearance precipitated a combination of feet stomping on the metal stands, clapping, shouting and whistling unheard of previously at a swim meet. The deafening noise brought little immediate response from the competitors. Steve Crocker smiled. The others looked oblivious to the surroundings. Sprinting has become serious business. The next day, most would be competing in a 50 meter race for \$18,000 in prize money sponsored by U.S. Swimming and televised nationally by ABC's "Wide World of Sports."

Suddenly, as the starter called the swimmers to the blocks, the natatorium became as silent as a church service. In lane three was Jager, now a resident of Tajires, N.M., an Albuquerque suburb where he is an aquatic director. In lane four, Biondi, from Castro Valley, Calif. and making a good living off endorse-

ments and public appearances. While the pair have faced each other in several match races this season, this was their first meeting with both in peak condition since the Olympics. Biondi even cut off almost all the hair on his head.

The beeper sounded, and the track start of Crocker propelled him into the water first. But when the field surfaced, Biondi looked to be slightly in the lead. Coming off the turn, Jager picked up momentum and pulled even with Biondi heading for the finish. As both reached for the touch, their heads appeared even. The difference was that Jager reached for the wall a bit quicker than Biondi and touched first in 19.05 for an American record. Biondi was timed in 19.12, also under the old mark of 19.15 he set at the 1987 NCAAs in Austin.

"You knew they were going to swim fast," Mission Bay coach Steve Bultman remarked. "I could have swum fast with that (crowd) reception."

Jager agreed. He said: "I felt the pressure of trying to make the Goodwill Games. What broke the tension was the fans before the race clapping and stomping. I wanted to turn the crowd on."

The 25-year-old sprinter, who represents Santa Clara (Calif.), didn't expect to go that fast after qualifying just third in 19.39.

"It's tough to drop 3-tenths," he said.

As for how the race developed, he analyzed: "As long as I am with them, I can beat them. The start has been my problem. The last 25 I was building and felt I was going faster and faster. But Matt has those long arms."

Biondi wasn't surprised the race went so fast in the modern pool



(Photo by Jeff Dimond)

which was seven feet deep throughout.

"I think I said six months ago whoever was going to have to break the record," he said. "I never saw Tom the whole time. I don't know what happened."

Biondi had mixed emotions about the result, feeling good to have bettered his old mark but never enjoying a loss and loss of a record.

"Tom's a 50 man. His body's built for it. He specializes in it. I'm a 50, 100 and 100 fly man."

It would have taken an American

Opposite page: Biondi (left) and Jager represented the old guard. The New Kids on the Blocks (above, l-r), frolicking at a Parthenon replica, are Wagstaff, Sanders, Thompson, Blanchard, Haislett and Skillman.

record or very close to it to beat Biondi in his other events, too. He won the 100 free in 42.30 for the fifth-fastest time in history and the 100 butterfly in 46.33, second on the all-time list and only 7-hundredths of a second off the American record set by Pablo Morales in 1986.

In the 100 free, Crocker took the early lead and turned midway in 20.05 followed by Jager (20.11) and Biondi (20.39). By the end of the next lap, however, Jager and Biondi were in front side-by-side. Biondi powered ahead with 15 yards to go. Jager was second in a personal-best 42.58. Only Biondi and Rowdy Gaines (42.36 in 1981) have gone faster. Biondi has the eight fastest times and 9 of the top 10 ever, including the record of 41.80.

Asked if he was saving anything for the prize-money competition on Saturday, Biondi responded: "That was my best shot. I probably tried

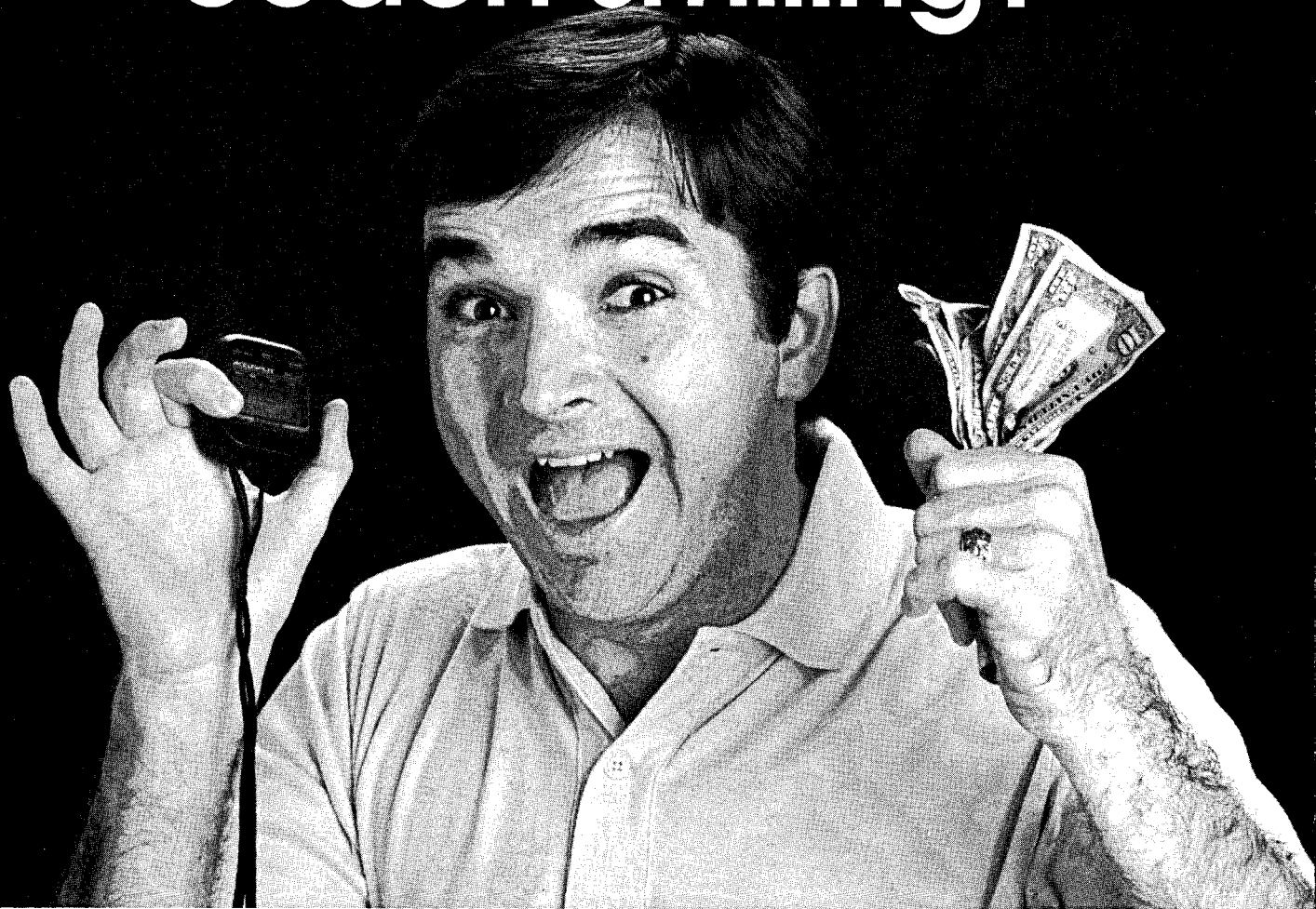
too hard. With my long stroke, I need to lengthen it out. I shortened up too much."

The five-time Olympic gold medalist, 24, earned the Robert J.H. Kiphuth Award as the men's high-point scorer with his two victories, a second and bonus points for meet records in the 100 free and 100 fly. Both old meet marks were set in 1985 by Biondi in the 100 free (42.32) and Morales in the 100 fly (46.95).

"I wanted to improve to show people I wasn't swimming because I'm greedy," he said. "I'm swimming because I love it. And I want to prove the best is yet to come."

That's certainly true for a talented group of girls that U.S. Swimming publicist Jeff Dimond has dubbed "The New Kids on the Blocks." Some might call Mary Ellen Blanchard, Nicole Haislett, ▶

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USS Senior Nationals

Summer Sanders, Jane Skillman, Jenny Thompson and Janie Wagstaff the "Silly Six." On a national team trip they all took to Australia this January, Skillman recalled: "We laughed non-stop. The older people couldn't believe it."

But they also put in a lot of work. Dick Shoulberg, the U.S. women's coach, didn't rest them for the meet in Perth (where next year's World Championships will be held). Just the opposite, he had them going 15,000 meters for the first few days before cutting back to 9,000. He also instituted a mandatory rest period during the afternoon.

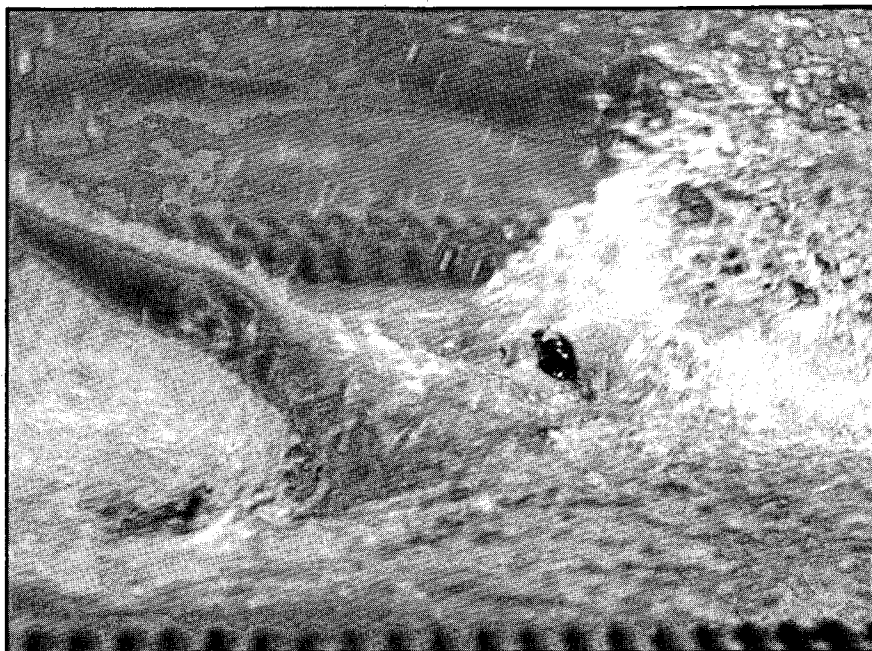
"I think kids want structure," said Shoulberg. "They wanted to be part of the social scene but were glad that they had to rest because they want to swim well. I took the decision out of their hands."

The hard work paid off with the high school hotshots capturing all but two of the women's individual events. Here is a rundown on them:

Nicole Haislett—17, 5-9, 140, Lakewood High senior in St. Petersburg, Fla. The 100 free champion at last year's long course nationals, she took the 50, 100 and 200 frees to become the women's high-point scorer.

The St. Petersburg sprinter was third in the 200 IM only 30 minutes preceding the 50, yet had enough left to close fast and nip Longhorn's Leigh Ann Fetter in 22.80. Fetter had gone 21.92 for an American record at the NCAAs but said she lacked explosiveness in trying to carry her taper another week. Haislett passed Betsy Mitchell of Longhorn off the final turn and set a meet record in the 100 free of 48.83, bettering the seven-year-old mark of 48.89 by Kansas' Tammy Thomas. In the 200, the Florida teenager caught Olympian Mitzi Kremer on the fourth lap and prevailed in 1:45.59. Kremer,

Betsy Mitchell (above) is one of the few holdovers in women's U.S. swimming. The teenagers haven't been able to beat her in the 100 back. However, while she erased a seven-year-old meet mark held by Sue Walsh in that event, Janie Wagstaff, 15, bettered Mitchell's 200 back mark.



(Photo by Mike Cosman)

who is again experiencing a shoulder problem, was second in 1:46.14.

"I never thought I could win the 50, 100 and 200," said Haislett. "I thought I could win the 100, but I didn't think I could beat Leigh Ann. This sets my goals higher."

Janie Wagstaff—15, 5-11, 148, Shawnee Mission East High sophomore in Mission Hills, Kan. The youngest of the "New Kids," she nevertheless produced the top individual performance with the second-fastest 200 backstroke of all time, a 1:56.14, which was a three-second drop. The Kansas City Blazers stand-out won by four yards over defending champion Dede Trimble of Stanford. Wagstaff also placed second in the 100 back in 55.12.

"In practice I do a lot of freestyle," said Wagstaff. "I think my backstroke comes naturally."

After being disappointed in her morning 200 back time of 1:58.21, she went out easier in the final and didn't use her legs as much.

Mary Ellen Blanchard—16, 5-8, 137, Norcross High (Ga.) junior. She had a tough act to follow after setting American records in both breaststrokes at this meet a year ago. The Dynamo star didn't lower those marks but won twice and improved her times in both IMs. She captured the 200 IM in 1:58.03, regaining her position as the second

fastest performer ever—Stanford's Janel Jorgensen had passed her at the NCAAs. In the 400 IM, she made a big drop to place second in 4:12.84. Blanchard defended her 200 breast title in 2:10.13 after going 2:10.14 in a heat to give her four of the top five performances of all time. She failed to repeat in the 100 breast, finishing only third after her goggles slipped down on the dive. Another personal best came in the 800 free relay with a 1:48.86 leadoff.

"After Chapel Hill (site of last year's short course nationals), I had more pressure to break the record in long course," said Blanchard. "I don't think now there is as much pressure on me. But I wanted to better my records and break a minute in the 100 breast. I think it's good to set your goals high. I wouldn't have done as well if I hadn't."

Jane Skillman—16, 5-4½, 125, Peddie School junior in Princeton, N.J. She joined Haislett as the meet's only triple winners, taking the distance freestyles. In the 500, Skillman forged past Longhorn's Stacy Cassiday in the last 50 to win in 4:40.75. The Peddie freestyler did a Janet Evans imitation in the longer distances, routing the fields in the 1000 (9:30.35) and 1650 (15:59.35). She's the first high school swimmer besides Evans to break 16 minutes in the last seven years. Training more ▶

USS Senior Nationals

for the endurance races, she lacked the speed in the 200 and placed seventh.

"My specialty is the last 50," Skillman said about her win in the 500. "If I'm close or even, I feel I can win. I used to go out real slow and pass (the leader) the last 100. On the senior level, I can't do that. I've learned to start faster."

Summer Sanders—17, 5-9½, 125, Oakmont High senior in Roseville, Calif. The Stanford-bound swimmer wasn't too far away from a quadruple, getting her first national titles in the 200 fly and 400 IM and seconds in the 100 fly and 200 IM. With defending champion Pam Minthorn of Curl-Burke missing the meet because of illness, Sanders won the 200 fly by six yards in 1:55.91, becoming the fifth woman under 1:56. In the 400 IM, she became the third woman to break 4:10—joining Caulkins and Evans—with a 4:09.79, taking the lead from Longhorn's Erika Hansen on breaststroke and winning by three yards.

The lithe Sanders, who wears Air Jordans on deck and the basketball star's number 23 on her cap, wasn't pleased with the way she swam her winning races. Of the 200 fly, she described: "I swam it awful. There's got to be a better way. If I'd take it out slower, I wouldn't have had

"I shouldn't look up at the board, but I did. There's so much time to think in the 400 IM."

trouble getting my arms out of the water the last 50. It really hit me on the last lap."

In the 400 IM, she looked up at the board and saw 56.26 for the fly when she was supposed to go 56.9. "I shouldn't look up at the board," she said, "but I did. There's so much time to think in the 400 IM."

The California Capital ace ended the race on a positive note, though, splitting 57.8 for a significant improvement of her freestyle.

Jenny Thompson—17, 5-8, 140, Dover (N.H.) junior. The Seacoast swimmer got to the top early, winning the 50 at the Pan American Games when she was 14. The defending 50 and 100 free champion, the versatile competitor added the 100 fly to her national title list. She went 53.77 in the prelims, then 54.03 in the final to miss making the Goodwill Games team by the slimmest of margins—1-hundredth of a second. Thompson also placed third in the 100 and 200 and sixth in the 50.

"I've been doing it all week," said Thompson about her faster morning swim. "A lot of people have. I'm not sure why."

Although she was upset at not making the Goodwill Games team, Thompson considered the meet a good one for her because she did personal bests in the 100 and 200 free and 100 fly.

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Photo by Mike Cosman

Longhorn veterans Betsy Mitchell and Tracey McFarlane prevented the New Kids from sweeping the women's events. Both had to go fast to beat them.

For the fourth consecutive time at a major short course meet (NCAA or nationals), Mitchell swam faster in the 100 back prelims than finals. She went 54.31 in the morning for a meet record and the fifth-fastest time ever and then edged Wagstaff by a half-body with a 54.86 in the final. The prelim swim gave Mitchell 8 of the 10 fastest 100 back times.

"I always swim all-out in the morning," said Mitchell, 24, "and at night just try to win. This was a stepping stone for the Goodwill Games. I'll only swim one race that day (there are no heats) and want to go under a minute (for the 100 meter back)."

McFarlane also swam slower in

Nelson Diebel (above) changes his technique in the breaststroke all the time, swimming whatever feels best. It's worked well for him. He swam the fastest breaststroke times at a short course nationals in the past nine years.

Awards, Records At A Glance

AMERICAN/U.S. OPEN/MEET RECORD		
Tom Jager, Santa Clara	50 Free	19.05
MEET RECORD		
Men		
Matt Biondi, SRV	100 free/fly	42.30/46.33
Ron Karnaug, JG	200 IM	1:46.00
Women		
Nicole Haislett, St. Petersburg	100 Free	48.83
Betsy Mitchell, Longhorn	100 Back	54.31p
Janie Wagstaff, KCB	200 Back	1:56.14
Longhorn (Mitchell, McFarlane, Sterkel, Fetter)	400 MR	3:39.78
NATIONAL AGE GROUP		
Boys (15-16)		
Joe Hudepohl, CPM	100 Free	43.84p
Eric Diehl, MVN	200 Free	1:36.19p
Girls (17-18)		
Nicole Haislett, St. Petersburg	100 Free	48.83
Girls (15-16)		
Jane Skillman, Peddie	1000 Free	9:30.35
Janie Wagstaff, KCB	100 Back	55.12
	200 Back	1:56.14
Mary Ellen Blanchard, Dynamo	200 IM	1:58.03
Girls (13-14)		
Anita Nall, NBAC	100 Breast	1:02.80p
Kristine Quance, Valley	200 Breast	2:15.61p
PHILLIPS PERFORMANCE AWARD		
Tom Jager, Santa Clara	50 Free	19.05
LEADING SCORERS		
Matt Biondi, SRV (Men)		
Nicole Haislett, St. Petersburg (Women)		
ROOKIES OF THE MEET		
Tim Herwig, 17, Curl-Burke (Men)		
4th, 1000 Free		
Lisa Jacob, 15, Mission Viejo (Women)		
3rd, 1650; 7th in 1000 (tiebreaker)		

winning the final than in the heats. She was hoping to get the American record of 1:00.66 in the 100 breast—the Canadian native set the U.S. open mark of 1:00.51 in 1988 before gaining American citizenship. She did 1:00.88 in the morning and then avenged a loss to Blanchard at last year's short course nationals with a 1:00.97 in the final. Mission Bay's Tori DeSilvia, just 15, almost caught McFarlane at the wall and beat Blanchard for second in 1:01.09.

"I've never gone slower at night until this meet and now twice here," said McFarlane, 23, who was third in the 200 breast in 2:11.88. "I was thinking I could go under a minute after having my fastest-ever prelim swim. I was disappointed in the time. I could tell that I was rushing."

Mitchell and McFarlane also combined with Jill Sterkel and Leigh Ann Fetter to set a meet record of 3:39.78 in the 400 medley relay, bettering the mark by last year's Longhorn squad of 3:42.41. The splits: Mitchell 54.83, McFarlane 1:00.85, Sterkel 54.53 and Fetter 49.57. Longhorn also won the freestyle relays, taking the 400 in 3:20.84 and 800 in 7:18.59.

In the men's competition, another post-collegian joined Jager and Biondi as a meet record-setter. Ex-California swimmer Ron Karnaug, not facing nemesis Dave Wharton who was at the NCAAs, won the 200 IM by three yards in 1:46.00. The old mark was 1:46.06 by Olympic gold medalist Tamas Darnyi of Hungary from 1987. Although Karnaug went faster at last year's NCAAs (1:45.77), he felt good about his time considering he's been studying for the medical school entrance exam and doing only about a quarter of his normal workouts. The Jersey Gator swimmer plans to put off medical school until the fall of 1992 in hopes of making the Olympics.

Of his rivalry with Wharton, he said, "I've helped him more than he's helped me. I take it out the first 150 and he sets the American record at the nationals and world record in Tokyo. I think I've helped him quite a bit. Because of that, I'm determined to beat him."

The only prominent foreign com- ▶

USS Senior Nationals

petitors at the meet were a group of Hungarians who swim for a Budapest club under the direction of national team coach Tamas Szechy. This is the fourth year in a row Szechy has brought his team to the short course meet. The Hungarians were unrested, having come from a tough training camp in Australia.

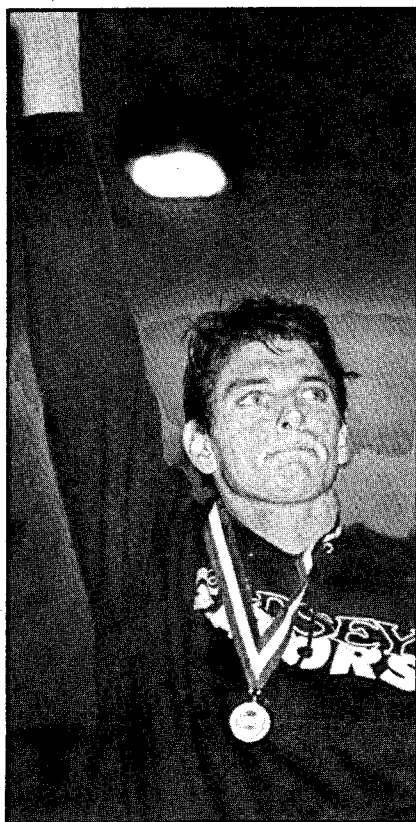
Still, the talented Darnyi won the 400 IM—an event where he is the world record holder and Olympic gold medalist. His time of 3:49.38, though, was far off the meet record of 3:43.04 he set in 1987. In the 200 IM, Darnyi was disqualified for a butterfly kick going into a turn on breaststroke after having finished second in 1:47.75.

Lanky Norbert Agh repeated as 500 free titlist in 4:20.27. Curiously, in-between the 20-year-old Hungarian placed only 15th in the 400 free at last year's European Championships. His explanation through an interpreter was that he rested too much and was not in shape for the race which came near the end of the meet.

Since the short course nationals was a qualifying meet for the Goodwill Games, swimmers in the backstroke had to surface within 10 meters after the start of the race. This had a major effect on the men's 100 back with ex-Iowa State performer Eric Hansen winning in 49.21, slower than any time in the final of the NCAAAs where unlimited submarining was allowed. Hansen trained little backstroke, concentrating on the 50 to prepare for the prize-money race the day after nationals.

"I'm not really in it for the money," said Hansen, an Arizona graduate student who swims for Hillenbrand. "I just want to be able to support myself to train. I don't aim to get wealthy."

Santa Barbara's Brian Alderman pulled off the biggest surprise of the meet, overwhelming the 200 fly field in 1:45.64. He finished 1½ seconds ahead of runner-up Ray Carey of Bernal's, the top qualifier. Alderman, 20, took 2½ years off from swimming to compete in beach volleyball before returning to the sport five months ago. The Santa Barbara City College student then shaved for



(Photo by Mike Gosman)

a Q meet in early January to make cuts. His highest national finish previously was 30th in the 100 fly five years ago.

"I'm really amazed at how fast I'm swimming," said Alderman. "I can't wait to see what I'll do in a year. Qualifying second took the pressure off. I was more relaxed as the underdog."

The rest of the men's events went to up-and-coming high school swimmers.

Peddie School senior Nelson Diebel, a native of Westchester, Ill., joined Biondi as the only men's double titlists with a sweep of the breaststrokes (53.84, 1:57.16). Diebel, who also won the 200 breast last year, has made big strides in the 100 this year and missed Steve Lundquist's meet record set in 1981 by just 1-hundredth. He swam a faster 200 breast of 1:56.77 in the prelims, becoming the first to crack 1:57 at the short course nationals since Lundquist established the meet record of 1:56.29 nine years ago. Diebel's times are the fastest ever swum by a high school competitor.

Olympian Rich Schroeder, who is

trying to stay in swimming while working full-time in housing construction, placed fifth in the 100 breast.

Fort Myers (Fla.) High senior Derek Weatherford, men's high-point scorer last year, almost didn't show up after being felled with chicken pox and bronchitis two weeks prior to the meet. With a Goodwill Games berth on the line, the Swim Florida performer decided to give it a shot and won the 200 back in 1:46.17. Royce Sharp, another Peddie senior standout, was a half-body back in second after qualifying first. Olympian Dan Veatch of Mission Bay passed up the meet, preferring to focus on long course competition.

Rapidly improving Eric Diehl sparked in the longer freestyles. The 16-year-old, who moved to Mission Viejo, Calif., from Fort Worth, Texas, a year ago January, dropped 15 seconds to win the 1000 in 8:58.26. Only a final burst by UCLA-bound Michael Picotte of Swim San Diego deprived Diehl of a 200 free victory. Picotte won by 1-hundredth in 1:36.26. Diehl also took second in the 500 and fifth in the 1650 which was won by 6-6 Matt Hooper, a 16-year-old from Alamo Area (Texas) in 15:05.17.

The final-event 400 medley relay victory in 3:16.14 allowed Longhorn to overtake Mission Viejo for the men's team title. The Texas club won by three points with a total of 232. The 400 free relay saw Jager lead off in a sizzling 42.75 to put Santa Clara ahead to stay in a 2:58.77 win. Anchor John Keppeler split 1:36.33 to pull out the 800 free relay for Mission Viejo in 6:35.40.

U.S. Swimming didn't release the women's nor combined team standings because of a protest which will not be resolved until May 1. □

Ron Karnaugh (above) of the Jersey Gators cracked the 200 IM meet record held by Olympic gold medalist Tamas Darnyi in beating the two-time defending champion from Hungary. It was the first national title for Karnaugh, who was third in the 200 IM at the '88 Olympic Trials.